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AUTHOR Barrett, Eve
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ABSTRACT

The performance of three groups of mature age unmatriculated students at the University of New South Wales was studied. The first group consisted of 43 students in their second year at the university. Performance of these students was creditable over a wide range of subjects, with a 76 percent clear pass rate. Of the 63 first-year students in the second group, 71 percent passed all subjects attempted. The third group consisted of 45 students over 25-years-old who satisfied a reduced H.S.C. prescription; 73 percent had a clear pass rate in their first year. Comparison showed that all groups performed well, with performances of the mature age students being slightly better than those of the reduced H.S.C. group. The number of courses appeared to affect the grade outcome, with those attempting fewer courses generally making better grades. (PHR)

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## MATURE AGE UNMATRICULATED STUDENTS

## PROGRESS REPORT NO. 3

Eve Barrett

July 1977

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Tertiary Education Research Centre
University of New South Wales

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At the time of writing this report mature age unmatriculated students are a familiar and accepted part of the University student population. Since the Special Admissions Scheme was introduced there have been three intakes of MAU students at the University of New South Wales and most of the first intake are well into their third year. Some will be graduating at the end of the year and others, undertaking Honours courses, are performing very creditably and setting high standards for their younger student colleagues.

MAU students, however, are not the only mature students admitted to this University. There have been a number of students who, having matriculated a number of years ago, entered the workforce and decided to return to the University at a later time. In addition, the University has, for a number of years, admitted older unmatriculated students who were judged able to undertake and benefit from university study: such applicants were granted provisional matriculation and allowed to proceed subject to satisfactory progress. A further category is made up of students who are admitted on the basis of having satisfied a reduced prescription of half the usual Higher School Certificate requirements. In 1976 this latter group was identified on enrolment so that their progress could be monitored and compared with that of the unmatriculated students (MAU).

This report will discuss the performance of three groups of mature age students.

(i) The 1975 MAU intake - 2nd year performance

(ii) The 1976 MAU intake - 1st year performance

(iii) The 1976 reduced H.S.C intake - 1st year performance

Some comments will be made of the comparative performance of these groups in light of the criteria by which they were selected.

## (i) 1975 MAU INTAKE - 2ND YEAR PERFORMANCE

Forty-three students re-enrolled in February 1976 but two of these discontinued without failure early in the year. One, a woman had an extremely good year in 1975 (gaining two High Distinctions and two Distinctions) but early in 1976 she married and discontinued her studies. The other, a part-time Commerce student who experienced some academic difficulties

in 1975, discontinued also. Report No. 2[1] discussed the first year performance of 49 MAU students and six of these did not re-enrol in 1976. One transferred to Macquarie and another to Monash; three whose names appeared on the final examination results for 1975 had in fact discontinued during that year. One other successful student did not re-enrol and attempts to contact her have failed. She represents one of a growing number of successful students who do not re-enrol the following year.[2]

Table I shows the number of students who passed all subjects attempted and those who failed one or more.

TABLE I

1975 MAU STUDENTS - 2ND YEAR PERFORMANCE

N = 41

| | |
|---|---|
| Passed all subjects attempted | 31 |
| Failed one subject | 8 |
| Failed 2 or more subjects | 2 |

This constitutes a clear pass rate of 76% compared to a pass rate in 1975 of 88%. However, it must be remembered that fewer students are now enrolled and they are attempting more subjects: i.e. 41 students in 1976 attempting 211 subjects compared with 49 students attempting 199 in 1975. Some of the subjects being studied in 1976 are half-units (as in Philosophy) and a failure may in fact represent only one half-unit of work. Of the eight people failing one subject, seven achieved at least one credit in other subjects. The eighth student, of Turkish origin, had to return to Turkey on family affairs at a crucial point in the academic year. Results for this cohort are again far better than that of the school-leaver intake and a closer look at the results of those who passed all subjects attempted demonstrates just how good they are. Of the 31 passing all subjects attempted 13 gained all graded passes, 17 gained some graded and some non-graded passes, and only one student just passed in all subjects. It seems probable

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1. Eve M. Barrett, "Mature Age Unmatriculated Students 1975: Progress Report No. 2. Second Session Performance", Research and Development Paper No. 39, Tertiary Education Research Centre, U.N.S.W., January 1976.

2. K. Lewandowski, J.P. Powell & Ruth White, "Wastage Among Successful Students at the University of New South Wales", Vestes, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1977.

that a number of those gaining all graded passes will proceed to good honours degrees, including a number of firsts. In Report No. 2[3] we questioned whether or not those students who performed so creditably in their first year would "lower their sights and be satisfied with merely passing". This is obviously not the case - these students are still aiming at and achieving a high level of performance.

Table II analyses performance by subject of MAU students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts (N=32) and shows that, once again, performance has been creditable over a wide range of subjects. The students were enrolled in 168 units - that is just over five per student on average. However, it must be remembered that not all the subjects attempted have the same unit value - some, such as History, are assessed on a yearly basis, others are assessed by session, and a small number are equivalent to half a session's work. Again, whereas most of the subjects studied are upper level units, some are advanced units and some are first year units. Overall there were 113 graded passes, 45 passes, and eight failures. As in 1975, Sociology stands out as the subject in which these students excel but there are graded passes in many other subjects

TABLE II
1975 - MAU STUDENTS - FACULTY OF ARTS
LEVEL OF PASS BY SUBJECT
N = 41

| Subject | No. of units studied | Grade awarded HD | D | CR | P | F/AF |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Political Science | 40 | 2 | 14 | 11 | 12 | 1 |
| Sociology | 32 | 2 | 19 | 10 | 1 | - |
| Psychology | 15 | - | 4 | 5 | 5 | 1 |
| History | 14 | - | 5 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Economic History | 12 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 5 | - |
| Philosophy | 12 | 1 | 1 | 4 | [illegible] | - |
| H.P.S. | 10 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Drama | 7 | - | 2 | 3 | 2 | - |
| English | 6 | - | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Spanish | 6 | - | 2 | 4 | - | - |
| Geography | 4 | - | - | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Biology | 2 | - | - | - | 2 | - |
| Economics | 2 | - | - | - | 2 | - |
| German | 2 | 1 | - | - | 1 | - |
| French | 1 | - | - | - | 1 | - |
| Industrial Relations | 1 | - | - | - | 1 | - |
| TOTAL | 166 | 8 | 55 | 50 | 45 | 8 |

3. Barrett, op.cit.

The four students enrolled in the second year of the Social Work course studied 24 subjects and achieved ten graded passes, 13 passes and one failure. The two Law students, both studying part-time, achieved graded passes in all subjects attempted. The two Commerce students, one full-time and one part-time, are still finding it difficult to cope with the mathematically-based parts of their course but they appear to be slowly overcoming their lack of adequate prerequisite skills and knowledge and will eventually graduate - but not in minimum time.

(ii) 1976 MAU INTAKE - 1ST YEAR PERFORMANCE

Seventy-one applicants were offered a place in 1976 and of these 63 enrolled. The basis for selecting this intake of students differed to some extent from that used in 1975. The first intake of MAU students had been selected from over 300 applicants on the basis of information provided by them as to why they thought they should be admitted to the University.[4] The second intake were selected after they had attended an obligatory meeting held in the University in which they were provided with information about the "range, nature and availability of the courses offered.... and given the opportunity to meet and talk with staff members and currently enrolled older students."[5] Intending applicants were supplied with a combined application form and biographical questionnaire and given details of an essay of 1,500 words to be submitted by a set date. It had been intended to invite all those who completed the requirements to attend a one-day programme of lectures and tutorials at the University but, although some 700 people attended the meetings, only 71 completed the essay assignment. The Admissions Committee therefore decided to offer places to all 71 applicants.

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4. See Minutes of the Admissions Committee of the Professorial Board, University of New South Wales, 13th January, 1975.

5. See Minutes of the Admissions Committee of the Professorial Board, University of New South Wales, 30th May, 1977.

The Committee felt that as the number to be admitted was small it would be possible to monitor the progress of the group to see whether all would succeed, and if not, determine what criteria could be used to identify those less likely to succeed.

Of the 63 who enrolled in February 1976, three discontinued before the fifth week of Session I and four more discontinued later in the session (3 without failure and 1 with failure): data for the remaining 56 students are included in this analysis. Thirty nine students are enrolled in the Faculty of Arts and there are smaller numbers in Social Work, Law, Commerce and Science. The overall performance of the group, while not as outstanding as that of the previous MAU intake, is nevertheless very commendable. This is particularly so when one realises that all applicants who completed the essay assignment were offered a place in 1976, regardless of the standard of the assignment.

Table III shows the overall performance of the 1976 MAU intake at the end of 1st year.

TABLE III

1976 MAU STUDENTS - 1ST YEAR PERFORMANCE

N = 56

| | |
|---|---|
| Passed all subjects attempted | 40 |
| Failed 1 subject | 8 |
| Failed 2 or more subjects | 8 |

This constitutes a clear 1st year pass rate of 71% compared with 88% in first year for the 1975 intake. A closer look at the performance of individual students shows that 11 students achieved all graded passes, 28 achieved one or more graded passes, and only one student achieved ungraded passes in all subjects attempted. Of the eight students failing one subject, three successfully passed three subjects and failed a fourth. Four of these same eight students achieved at least one graded pass. It seems likely that at least three of the students failing two or more subjects discontinued during 1976 as examination results show a number of 'Absent Fail'. Failing students will be discussed later in this report when a comparison of the procedures used to select MAU students is attempted.

Table IV analyses the performance by subject of the 39 MAU students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts.

## TABLE IV

## 1976 MAU STUDENTS - FACULTY OF ARTS

## LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE BY SUBJECT - FIRST YEAR

N = 56

| Subject | No. of units studied | Grade Awarded HD | D | CR | P | F/AF |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sociology | 48 | 3 | 20 | 20 | 4 | 1 |
| Political Science | 30 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 10 | 10 |
| History | 17 | - | 1 | 6 | 8 | 2 |
| Economic History | 18 | - | 4 | 5 | 7 | 2 |
| Psychology | 14 | - | 3 | 5 | 5 | 1 |
| H. P. S. | 13 | - | 3 | 2 | 5 | 3 |
| Philosophy | 12 | - | 1 | 5 | 5 | 1 |
| Drama | 12 | - | - | 2 | 7 | 3 |
| Economics | 7 | - | - | 1 | 5 | 1 |
| French | 6 | - | 5 | - | 1 | - |
| Geography | 4 | - | 1 | 1 | 2 | - |
| Biology | 4 | - | - | 1 | 3 | - |
| English | 3 | - | - | - | 1 | 2 |
| Industrial Relations | 3 | - | - | - | 1 | 2 |
| German | 2 | - | - | 1 | 1 | - |
| Mathematics | 1 | - | - | - | 1 | - |
| TOTAL | 194 | 4 | 39 | 57 | 66 | 28 |

The above table shows that MAU students have a creditable performance over a wide range of subjects. The number of units failed in Political Science is higher than might have been anticipated. However, examination results show that most of the less successful students were enrolled in Political Science. One student who achieved a High Distinction in Political Science in Session I was absent for Session II examinations. There are fewer failures in Psychology this year compared with the 1975 results.

Five students in the School of Social Work studied 25 units, gaining 14 graded passes and 11 passes. In Law six students studied 26 units and gained 16 graded passes, eight passes and two failures. In the Faculty of Commerce, as with the previous intake, performance is more variable - there are fewer graded passes and more subjects failed. However, although not so creditable as MAU performance in other faculties it none the less compares favourably with that of the normal intake and should not be taken to mean that mature students cannot cope with subjects in this Faculty.

(iii) 1976 INTAKE - REDUCED H.S.C. PRESCRIPTION

For a number of years the University has been admitting students over 25 who satisfied a reduced H.S.C. prescription but until this year it has been difficult to identify these students. Fifty-nine students in this category were enrolled in 1976 but only 45 are considered in this analysis. Two had discontinued by the beginning of the session, one had enrolled at Sydney University, another was found to be fully matriculated, one enrolled as a miscellaneous student and another was found to be only 17 years old. A further eight discontinued during first session and no results were available for these students. Table V gives the overall performance of this group.

TABLE V

1976 INTAKE - REDUCED H.S.C.

1ST YEAR PERFORMANCE

N = 45

| | |
|---|---|
| Passed all subjects | 33 |
| Failed 1 subject | 7 |
| Failed 2 or more subjects | 5 |

This represents an overall pass rate in first year of 73%. However, the percentage of students in this group able to proceed into second year is far higher as a number of those failing one subject are in the Faculty of Arts and have successfully completed three other subjects.

Table VI analyses the performance by subject of the reduced H.S.C. students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts.

TABLE VI

1976 REDUCED H.S.C. ENTRANTS - FACULTY OF ARTS

LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE BY SUBJECT - 1ST YEAR

N = 34

| Subject | No. of units studied | Grade Awarded HD | D | CR | P | F/AF |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sociology | 40 | 4 | 7 | 18 | 10 | 1 |
| Political Science | 23 | - | 3 | 7 | 10 | 3 |
| Psychology | 17 | - | 1 | 4 | 8 | 4 |
| History | 17 | - | 1 | 5 | 8 | 3 |
| Philosophy | 12 | - | 1 | 2 | 9 | - |
| English | 10 | - | - | 1 | 7 | 2 |
| H.P.S. | 10 | - | - | 3 | 6 | 1 |
| Economic History | 8 | - | 1 | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| Drama | 8 | - | - | 1 | 6 | 1 |
| German | 7 | - | 2 | 3 | 2 | - |
| Economics | 5 | - | - | - | 4 | 1 |
| French | 5 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | - |
| Biology | 4 | - | - | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Industrial Relations | 4 | - | - | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Geography | 3 | - | - | - | 2 | 1 |
| Spanish | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | - |
| TOTAL | 174 | 6 | 17 | 51 | 81 | 19 |

Students in this group achieved 74 graded passes out of a total of 174 attempted, with Sociology once again standing out as a subject in which mature students excel. However, although there are a large number of graded passes in this subject there are less Distinctions and more Passes compared with the 1976 MAU group. We will return to this difference later when comparing the intakes.

The performance of the four students enrolled in the School of Social Work was excellent with their marks averaging 70.5% for the year. Very few students were enrolled in other faculties and their performances ranged from a student in the Faculty of Architecture who averaged 78% to a full-time Science student who averaged 47%.

COMPARING SELECTION METHODS

This section will discuss the performance of the intakes in relation to the criteria by which they were selected. As mentioned earlier, the 1975 MAU intake had been selected on the basis of a letter of application to the University stating why they thought they should be admitted. Before reading these letters the Admissions Committee had agreed upon three main criteria for selection: (i) evidence of educational disadvantage, (ii) a commitment to continuing education, and (iii) a capacity for intellectual development. If, by virtue of their letters of application, the applicants appeared to satisfy these criteria they were offered admission to the University. Some 300 letters of application were received and on the above basis 63 places were offered. As it was late in 1974 before the Scheme was announced in the press there was not much time available for interested persons to make the arrangements necessary for entry to the University and a number of such persons may have been deterred from applying. However, it was anticipated that in subsequent years the number of applicants would increase significantly. In selecting the 1975 MAU intake the Admissions Committee had spent many hours reading the letters of application to determine whether or not there was evidence of the stated criteria in these letters. In order to cope with an increasing number of applicants in 1976 and subsequent years, a selection procedure had to be deivsed which would consume less time and yet be able to handle a large number of applications. By the middle of 1975 it was apparent that the 1975 intake, selected on the basis of their motivation and commitment to university, had performed creditably and any future selection procedure would need to give intending students the opportunity to demonstrate that they, too, possessed these characteristics. The Admissions Committee decided that the selection

procedure for the 1976 intake should operate as a self-selecting device 'enabling the applicants to become as fully informed as possible and to test their own clarity of purpose, motivation, and persistence.[6]

In September two evening meetings were held to provide information to interested persons about the Special Admissions Scheme and allow intending applicants the opportunity to talk to staff members and to currently enrolled mature age students. At that time application forms, together with details of an essay assignment, were handed out to intending applicants. During the course of the two meetings some 700 people attended and most of those collected information and application forms but only 71 applications were submitted by the due date. It had earlier been intended to invite all those completing the assignment to an induction day at the University so that applicants could gain some experience of what it was like to be a student. In view of the small number of applicants the Admissions Committee decided to offer admission to all 71, irrespective of the standard of the essay assignment. The performance of the 1976 MAU intake is all the more creditable when it is considered in relation to the procedure by which it was selected. 'Self-selection' can be said to have occurred with this intake as eight of the successful applicants rejected the offer of a place and a further seven failed to enrol or discontinued early in Session I.

Most of the 56 students in this entry group performed well but there were some students who experienced academic difficulty and more subjects were failed than in the previous year. It is necessary to ask to what extent this was a consequence of the changed selection procedure. In order that some comparison can be made between the two MAU intakes 1976 applicants were asked to complete a questionnaire which was designed to provide information similar to that supplied by the 1975 intake in their letters of application. This questionnaire data has been analysed[7] and the 56 students in this 1976 MAU intake have been divided into two categories: (i) those who display two or three of the previously mentioned criteria (Cat. X) and (ii) those displaying 1 or 0 of these criteria (Cat. Y). This division was decided upon because the 1975 intake, selected on the basis of these criteria, had performed commendably. Table VII gives the performance of 1976 MAU students by category.

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6. Ibid.

7. An initial analysis of this data was reported to the Admissions Committee earlier this year.

## TABLE VII

## 1976 MAU INTAKE

## PERFORMANCE IN RELATION TO EXTENT TO WHICH SELECTION CRITERIA WERE MET

N = 56

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Category X | | | |
| | N = 44 | Clear pass | 38 |
| | | Some failures | 6 |
| Category Y | | | |
| | N = 12 | Clear pass | 2 |
| | | Some failures | 10 |

The proportion of Category Y students having some failures is very high, particularly when compared to those in Category X, suggesting that these three criteria are useful in identifying students who are likely to perform well.

The number of failures by category is given below in Table VIII.

## TABLE VIII

## 1976 MAU STUDENTS

## NUMBER OF FAILURES IN 1ST YEAR

N = 16

| | Category X | Category Y |
|---|---|---|
| Failed 4 or more | - | 2 |
| Failed 3 | 1 | 3 |
| Failed 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Failed 1 | 4 | 4 |

A subjective assessment of the assignments completed by the students in Category Y (that is, those students who might not have been selected had the Admissions Committee sought evidence of the three criteria being met) showed nine to be competent. Of the three judged not to be competent, one student failed three subjects and the other two failed two subjects. However, it must not be forgotten that there were two students in Category Y who performed well and who might have been excluded had selection been based solely on the analysis of the questionnaire data. All three students who were judged likely to discontinue belong to Category Y. One other student in this category would be required to 'show cause' and eight would be able to proceed with their studies.

The foregoing would seem to suggest that, at least in the non-science based Faculties, performance at university is determined to a large extent by motivation and commitment to study and not solely by intellectual capacity. This is evidenced by a study at Birmingham by Wankowski[8] who showed that the majority of adequately motivated students tended to higher academic achievement. MAU students are not only highly motivated but are, for the most part, 'early leavers' and this unexpected opportunity to pursue university studies brings with it an enhanced desire to be successful. Those who discontinue do so not so much because they lack intellectual capacity but rather because they have not fully appreciated the demands that will be made on them and the amount of time and effort required to complete a university course.

In comparing the reduced H.S.C. intake with both MAU intakes the differences in performance are minimal as all three groups have performed well. It may be that returning to school (or technical college), studying courses designed for 17-18 year olds, using text books aimed at this age group and being subject to the pressures associated with sitting for the H.S.C. examination may not be the best preparation for older students wishing to enter university. Much of what is learnt in the school environment may need to be unlearned in the transition from secondary student to university student. Overall, the performance of MAU students is somewhat superior to the reduced H.S.C. intake in the Faculty of Arts. One must, of course, be wary of making generalisations as there are a number of other factors at work here and data are not available to help determine their significance. It may be that those students reached by the Special Admissions Scheme are different in some way to those who attempted the reduced H.S.C. (although some apply under both schemes). Certainly if one looks at the subjects studied in the Faculty of Arts there are more students entering by way of the reduced H.S.C. who intend to become teachers and there is a larger proportion of this group enrolled in four subjects rather than three. This latter fact is of some interest because if one looks at the performance of all these mature intakes it becomes apparent that those taking only three subjects perform better than most of those attempting four. Students entering under the Special Admissions Scheme are more likely to have been counselled on the advisability of taking only three subjects whereas those

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8. J.A. Wankowski, Random Sample Analysis: Motives and Goals in University Studies, University of Birmingham Educational Survey, Birmingham, 1970.

entering on the basis of a reduced H.S.C. may not have been. Half the students taking four 1st year subjects, both MAU and reduced H.S.C., failed at least one subject.

## CONCLUSION

Mature students, however, admitted, continue to perform at a very high level and the results of those with no matriculation qualifications fully justifies the continuation of the Special Admissions Scheme. In view of the fact that students do 'self-select' and that numbers proceeding into first year are always considerably below those who first apply, it would seem reasonable for the University to offer more places should the demand increase. Many students, both mature and straight from school, fill in a preliminary enrolment and then decide subsequently not to complete their enrolment. Others discontinue early in the year when they become acquainted with the pressures of university work. At the end of 1976, 246 MAU applicants completed the selection procedure for entry in 1977 but places were offered to only 207, selection being based ultimately on a one-hour essay examination held during an induction course. However, of the 207 places offered only 200 were accepted and in February this year 150 of these applicants completed their enrolment. Since then others will have discontinued. It is rather surprising that so many decide not to enrol after having made such an effort by attending meetings and submitting assignments. It may be that for some of these non-enrolling successful applicants the knowledge that they are able to gain entry to university is in itself sufficient reward. The University has judged them capable of benefitting from a university education and they are now able to say they chose not to take advangate of this opportunity. In view of the number finally enrolling it would seem that all 246 applicants could have been offered a place; of the 39 excluded some would not have taken up the offer and most of the others may well have succeeded in their studies.